WASHINGTON

PROFILES IN

soil health

Douglas Poole
Mansfield, WA
5600 acres
Crops: Winter Wheat, Canola
Covers: Fava beans, radishes, turnips, oats, barley, rye, sunflowers

unlock the SECRETS IN THE SOIL

Soil Health Evangelist

He's an evangelist who saved his own soil. Now he wants to help others save theirs.

When Douglas Poole speaks, you hear the passion in his voice for how healthy soil has helped his farm. But Poole wasn't always a soil health proponent; in fact he used to be an accountant. He's been a farmer before, and when he came back to the farm this time, leaving behind his job with the school system, he decided to make it forever.

Poole is a dryland farmer of winter wheat in Mansfield, one of the driest parts of Washington State. The area only receives about seven to nine inches of rain per year. With so little water, Poole needed to find a system more efficient than conventional farming for his crops to flourish. He decided on no-till.

Using no-till practices keeps Poole's land from becoming drier than it already is. Poole's goal is to always keep his soil covered. Above is stubble from his most recent winter wheat harvest.

"In the beginning, it was more of an opportunity to see if I could save labor, save costs and everything else. The more I researched it, the more I saw that it wasn't so much no-till as it was soil. That was really the driver," said Poole.

Lacking Community Support

But support for no-till in Poole's community was lacking.

"Nothing motivates me quite like being told I can't do something. They told me no-till doesn't work here, and you're not supposed to be able to grow any type of canola," Poole said. "Well, look around. Here we are."

To get started with no-till and other soil health practices, Poole went to USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. In 2012, he was awarded one of the first Energy Initiative contracts through NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program. This contract allowed him to partially convert his operation to no-till, implement cover crops and crop rotations. Then in 2015, he was able to fully convert the remainder of his farm to no-till practices through the EQIP Air Quality Initiative.

No-till, Cover Crops and Crop Rotations

Poole has not only implemented no-till practices, but also crop rotations including canola, sunflowers and spring crops.

"To me it's all related – no-till needs cover crops and cover crops need no-till."

However, it's a conservation practice combination that many conventional growers are loath to try, especially in 10-inch precipitation zones.

But Poole's soil health approach isn't faith-based. In fact, he's constantly researching soil health practices that help him improve his soil, and he has participated in several cover crop studies with his local conservation district, as well as some of his own.

Recently, for example, Poole decided to let his last cover crop grow throughout the year, rather than terminating it.

"We found that if we could have that diversity of root growth in soil, we could actually gain moisture. Almost like we are farming moisture. And obviously, that enhances the soil."

Poole worked with NRCS in Okanogan County, Washington, to get financial and technical assistance to install soil health practices on his land.

In the future, Poole's vision is for his land to be completely covered at all times. Currently his land is at about two-thirds of that. Within ten years time, he plans to have no fallow land.

"I can't even imagine being a conventional farmer and looking to the future. I feel like those of us that have made the conversion have a future." *- Douglas Poole, landowner*

To learn about the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and how NRCS can help you install conservation practices on your land, including information on soil health and conservation assistance, contact your local USDA service center or learn how to Get Started with NRCS online.

Want to unlock the secrets in YOUR soil?

Go to: www.nrcs.usda.gov

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